

For Immediate Release
Tuesday, March 10, 2009

Grassley checks management of conflicts among National Science Foundation researchers

WASHINGTON – Senator Chuck Grassley is asking a government watchdog to take the same kind of look at how the National Science Foundation (NSF) manages financial conflicts among its researchers as was done last year for the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

“It’s good that the Inspector General for the National Science Foundation has agreed to look into this,” Grassley said. “It’s only right that financial ties are fully disclosed when researchers are publicly funded and when the public has so much at stake with the outcome and influence of that research.”

The NSF administers \$6 billion each year in federal research grants for mathematics, computer science and social sciences. The NIH administers \$24 billion each year in federal research dollars. Last year, the Inspector General for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) identified major shortcomings with the way the NIH manages information about financial ties between researchers and outside industry. Grassley’s own investigations have found NIH enforcement of federal rules requiring disclosure to be extremely lax.

Grassley said he’s concerned about the same kind of situation at the NSF, where grant recipients aren’t diligent about getting accurate information from their researchers and the NSF isn’t proactive about making sure grant recipients are keeping track and verifying information.

Grassley is actively reviewing the disclosure of financial ties between physicians and industry and has sponsored legislation with Senator Herb Kohl of Wisconsin that would require pharmaceutical, medical device and biologic makers to publicly report money they give to doctors over \$100.

The 2008 report of the Inspector General for HHS about NIH is here:
<http://www.oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-03-06-00460.pdf>.

The text of the letter Grassley sent today to the Inspector General for the NSF follows here:

March 10, 2009

The Honorable Thomas C. Cross
Acting Inspector General
National Science Foundation
Office of Inspector General
4201 Wilson Blvd., Suite 1135
Arlington, VA 22230

Dear Acting Inspector General Cross:

As a senior member of the United States Senate and as Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Finance (Committee), it is my duty under the Constitution to conduct oversight into the actions of the executive branch, including the activities of the National Science Foundation (NSF). In this capacity, I must ensure that the NSF properly fulfills its mission to strengthen scientific and engineering research, and makes responsible use of the public funding provided for these research disciplines.

Last November, I sent a letter to Director of the NSF inquiring about the apparent lack of oversight regarding the almost \$6 billion in annual grants distributed by the NSF.^[1] In particular, I apprised the Director of a radio show called “The Infinite Mind.” This show was funded by the NSF and was pulled off the air by National Public Radio after it was discovered that the show’s host had numerous conflicts of interest that had not been disclosed. For instance, during several years that the program was running, the host of the show received almost \$1.3 million in speaking fees and honoraria for giving over 480 talks for GlaxoSmithKline. I have attached a copy of that letter.

In response, the NSF informed me that the company that produced the radio show, Lichtenstein Media, had received a grant of \$573,112 in 1999.^[2] According to the NSF, Lichtenstein Media was required to implement and enforce a written policy that was consistent with NSF requirements. Further, Lichtenstein Media was required to “disclose the NSF conflicts that cannot be satisfactorily managed, reduced or eliminated by the award.” The NSF also stated that “an audit of the award by the Office of the Inspector General would confirm the awardee’s conflicts of interest policies.”

This one example has me concerned that there may be more widespread problems regarding the oversight of the NSF extramural grant program. For instance, last January the Inspector General for the Department of Health and Human Services uncovered problems with the Department’s oversight of financial conflicts of interest for extramural grants from the National Institutes of Health.^[3] I am concerned that similar problems exist at the NSF. Accordingly, I ask that you conduct an audit of the NSF extramural grants similar to that performed by the HHS IG. As with the prior audit, I ask that you examine, at a minimum, the following two issues:

1. Determine the number and nature of financial conflicts of interest reported by the grantee institutions to NSF.
2. Determine the extent to which the NSF oversees financial conflicts of interest of grantee institutions, primary investigators, and other senior investigators and how it manages those conflicts.

^[1] Letter from Senator Charles E. Grassley, Ranking Member, Senate Finance Committee to Dr. Arden L. Bement Jr., Director, National Science Foundation, dated November 19, 2008.

^[2] Letter from Dr. Arden L. Bement, Director, National Science Foundation to Senator Grassley, dated December 12, 2008.

^[3] Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Inspector General, “National Institutes of Health: Conflicts of Interest in the Extramural Research,” January 2008.

Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,
Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Member